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ABSTRACT

Classrooms are filled with students with confident and vibrant voices, and most educators encourage them to use these voices in their writing. Many of the strategies of the process-centered classroom (peer editing, conferences, workshops, in-house publishing) also encourage students to write in real voices to real readers; however, there is still a credibility gap. Students hear their teachers, but they do not believe them. It is easier and more comfortable to write for an imagined audience in a distant and disengaged voice. After all, those types of papers have always gotten "As." For one instructor, the move from an English department to a communications department 5 years ago was a refreshing change. Instead of the dreaded rhetorical modes or embarrassingly self-conscious essays, students were writing magazine and newspaper articles, film and television scripts, public service announcements and ads--forms that students see, hear, and read, and that are a vital part of their lives. These forms are encouraged as a writing strategy--even in the English department. (TB)

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Discovering Voice Through Media Writing

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A Brief Presentation at the 1995 4C's Meeting (Washington, D.C.)
March 25, 1995

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At this conference last year and in the last issue of the 4 C's journal (February 1995, Volume 46, No 1) David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow brought an interesting debate into the public arena. Bartholomae and Elbow ask us to consider whether we should be teaching our first-year students to compose as academics or as writers. Elbow clearly draws the battle lines in his essay, "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic." Interestingly though, as they line up their arguments, both Bartholomae and Elbow focus on voice.

Bartholomae argues for academic writing as the true mission of the writing classroom. He points out that no one is advocating for stuffy, lifeless prose, that academics and writers both identify good writing as writing that is elegant, engaging and humane. We can surely agree with Bartholomae that writers who wish to be read are flexible writers, able to engage the scholar or the poet equally well.

Elbow, however, argues that academic writing by its very nature disallows first-year students from using this engaging voice. Academic writing, according to Elbow, puts students in the subservient position of always writing "up" to a more knowledgeable reader. The sub-text of academic writing for the student writer becomes a tentative "Is this OK?" (One of my colleagues calls this voice "the abject student crouch.") A writer, however, usually writes with more authority than the reader has, and so the sub-text for the writer is more likely to be "Listen to me. I have something to tell you."

Our classrooms are filled with our students' confident and vibrant voices, and I know we all encourage them to use these voices

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in their writing. Many of the strategies of the process-centered classroom (peer editing, conferences, workshops, in-house publishing) also encourage students to write in real voices to real readers; however, there is still a credibility gap. They hear us, but they don't believe us. It's easier, and more comfortable, to write for an imagined audience in a distant and disengaged voice. After all, they've always gotten As...

Students are aware of these glitches. When I tell my students to write for real readers, they nod knowingly and then try to psych out what "*she* really wants." One of my students, after I chided him for reverting to a stuffy and boring voice, confessed that it wasn't his fault; it was Steve's. Steve was the kid in his high school English class who wrote in an inflated voice with hundred dollar words and always got As on his papers.

It's shocking, I suppose, to believe how many Miss (or Mr.) Grundys still rule the classroom, still reward the Steves in our writing classes, and have not yet learned how to help students demand of their readers, "Listen to me." It's even more shocking for me to think that I may have been one of these neo-Grundys myself.

For many years as a new teacher of writing, schooled, as many of us were, in analyzing literature as preparation for teaching writing, I struggled to find ways to help my students find their "authentic" voices. But, it was hard to convince them to trust their own voices when they were writing descriptions of their bedrooms or compare and contrast essays on pets or research papers on Lizzie Borden. At the end of the day I read a great deal of what Ken Macrorie dubbed "Engfish," language that stank of insincerity.

Five years ago I moved from an English department in one college to a communication department in another, and it was an eye-opening change. Instead of the dreaded rhetorical modes or embarrassingly self-conscious essays, students were writing magazine and newspaper articles, film and television scripts, public service announcements and ads--forms that students see hear, and read, that is a vital part of their culture and their lives... and, unfortunately, are often dismissed as not worthy of serious study.

It is in this rich public arena, however, that writers are writing important work. I think of magazine writers like Joan Didion, John McPhee, and Susan Orlean; scriptwriters like Jane Campion, Woody Allen, and Robert Towne; memoirists like Maya Angelou, Russell Baker, and Tobias Wolff; and the extraordinarily creative ad writers published in Communication Arts. As these writers model so well, when you write in these formats, you have to find an accessible and intelligent voice to engage a real reader.

To bring home this point to his students, another one of my colleagues jokes with his students that he will read their papers until he finds his attention wandering and then put a check mark at that point. The papers with the check mark closest to the end of the paper will receive an A...and so on. (It's hard work to convince students to use their authentic voices. It's hard for them even to find these voices, buried, as they often are, under a decade worth of social, cultural, and academic affectation.)

So, the strategy I want to suggest to you today-- in this briefest of talks--is to have students write memoirs, film scripts, news stories, ad copy, and feature articles. These forms will serve all of your pedagogical goals and at the same time allow students to find and use their audible, dramatic, and authentic voices. I have time for one quick example. Listen to the voice in the first draft of a memoir from one of my students:

> Having served in the military, my father has always been a disciplined man. In most instances I have benefited from this, but on other occasions I have been the bearer of unnecessary hardships. Waking up early has never been a forte of mine. I, like my mother, like to sleep undisturbed and through the morning. My father without an alarm clock springs out of bed at six o'clock every morning without fail. I always found this strange that any person in their right mind would want to be awake that early for no reason on the weekend. It never personally bothered me until one early morning in my freshman year in high school.

This is not a bad piece of writing for a first draft. It's clear that the writer is writing her way into the piece, that she's looking for a focus and finally finds one in her final sentence. But, the voice is an expository one, distant and detached from the subject as well as from the reader. Listen to how Tara revised this lead after she found her narrative voice and figured out what she really wanted to say...and to whom.

> Peeking out from underneath my comforters, I caught sight of my clock which read a blurry seven-thirty. Filled with dread, I flipped towards my wall and tried to hide in my blanket's softness and warmth. As I closed my eyes, my father burst into my room and shook me to get out of bed. I played dead.
>
> "Come on Tara, we've got to get to the track real early to practice."
>
> "Not now," I groaned without moving. "It's too early. Let's go later."

One final suggestion I have is to encourage your students to publish not necessarily in in-class magazines but to send their features off to magazines, their scripts to agents, their ads and public service campaigns to non-profit organizations. What my colleagues and I are discovering is that by writing for real readers in real-world formats students stop asking "Is this OK?" and begin commanding our attention as readers.